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# The Story of a Toiler



By  
ANDREW FRANZEN



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# The Story of a Toiler

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MAIN



## I

My workshop is the paper mill.  
Its mighty boss controls my will.  
Its wheels and rollers set my speed—  
All goaded by the owner's greed.

But when in dusky eventide  
The toiler seeks his fireside  
I may walk the path I choose.  
Then touches me some minor muse,  
So that I can in soulful spell  
My woes in measured numbers tell.

I hardly would compare myself  
With Shakespeare, for he wrote for pelf,  
Grew rich and fat in Stratford town,  
While I am lean and trodden down.  
No doubt when he struck loud his lyre  
His spirit rose and fluttered higher,



For he lived high on beef and ale,  
While half-full is my dinner-pail.  
A half-fed man, he lives but half,  
Like the aged on his staff.

I am a man of little school,  
But never have been called a fool,  
And never had the lust for knowledge  
Spurred me to find it in a college.  
In simple words the humbly taught  
Express the scholar's gems of thought.  
Yet are my lines not always smooth,  
Be sure, I aim to tell the truth.  
So listen to my simple tale!  
You shall not find it dull or stale,  
But sometimes sad and sometimes light,  
As life itself upon its flight.

## II

Some other troubles blight my life,  
For, understand, I have a wife  
Whose temper waxes worse and worse  
As leaner grow my face and purse.  
She goes in trim and stylish dress  
While oft my shirt is buttonless.  
Of course, some girls go fashion-wild,  
Which harms no husband, kith or child.  
And so I cannot well divine  
For whom Belinda wants to shine.

I lay the blame to feminism.  
'Tis worse than any other ism,  
Brings gloom and chill to hearth and home,  
Drives husbands out to drink or roam,



Dyspeptic and on downward course  
From rotten canned-foods bought at stores.  
Yes, cooking interferes with pleasure;  
In short, 'tis work and curtails leisure.  
I dare not take to court my plight,  
For there a woman's always right.

A strange distemper of the mind  
Is sweeping over womankind,  
And I fear it spreads to others,  
For women still are all men's mothers.

All this and more I will endure  
For little Elsie sweet and pure,  
My child from whom I would not part.  
She is the treasure of my heart.  
I know she's mine, for all can see  
In features fine she looks like me.

In deep distress, despair or fears,  
Some find relief in foolish tears,  
But with the lightness of a clown  
I often laugh my troubles down;  
And oft I yield for my own sake—  
The things that bend, they will not break.  
We cannot know in pride's elation  
The comfort found in resignation.

I also can more lightly live  
By being not too sensitive.  
The slightest pricking of a pin  
Will pain the one whose skin is thin.  
And when Belinda said to me:  
"Your writing is not poetry:  
I'll see, it might for kindling burn,"  
I spoke no angry word in turn.

### III

Now I am not a socialist,  
Nor love the blood-red anarchist.  
For me no far Utopia gleams.  
The healthy have but seldom dreams,  
Nor see they all the world awry,  
With bodeful signs across the sky,  
This world is always onward moving,  
Its people changing, not improving,  
Nor growing worse in countless years,  
However it to us appears.  
Life's old routine now we repeat  
With toiling hands and wandering feet.  
Mankind has ever multiplied  
Until the poor of misery died,  
And famine, war and pestilence  
Swept the surplus millions hence.  
Before the strong the weak must yield,  
This earth is all one battlefield.  
Each morn the hawk its breakfast chases,  
The grizzly bear his prey embraces.  
The laws of nations guards the gunner;  
Theirs is the robber's code and honor.  
The white race killed the red by might.  
The yellow hosts will crush the white.  
How many a human, if he can,  
Will live upon his fellow man!  
And he who robs my means of living  
Preys on my life, beyond forgiving.  
The Hellene race of high renown  
Were mostly helots, trodden down.  
The humble serf for ages trod

With clumsy feet his master's clod.

All this has been, now here am I  
Perhaps a wage-slave till I die.  
What else is he who must obey,  
Accept abuse and can't say nay,  
Nor even fix the wage and price  
Of what he earns and what he buys.  
Yes, change my master, that I can,  
And change from fire to frying-pan;  
And starve and tire while finding one,  
Trudging from morn till sets the sun.

Certain of tomorrow's bread,  
The negro slave had less to dread.  
So slavery I must define:  
A thing ordained by will divine.  
But reading this, I trust they find  
That they cannot enslave my mind.

And yet all men some burden bear;  
So even does the millionaire,  
For gold is weighing on the brain,  
And sleepless lies the lust of gain,  
And the time he would beguile  
Is certainly not worth its while.  
So we should bring him sympathy.  
He's still of our humanity;  
And if we all his millions had  
Perhaps we should be just as bad.  
Again, no man is half so black  
As envy paints him on his back.  
So I will not the rich abuse,  
The poor from every sin excuse.

The rich or ragged idlers shirk,  
Alike they live on others' work.

And somehow when in thoughtful mood  
Upon the deeper things I brood,  
I see a justice over all,  
Through good and ill, through rise and fall.  
Each punishment that I am taking,  
I see, is all of my own making.  
What moral right had I to wed,  
Depending on a boss for bread;  
To take in hand a child and wife,  
With scarce enough for single life!  
The young are blind to that great law,  
Set forth by proverb, sage and saw:  
An hour of throbbing ecstasy  
Begets a day of misery.

How blest is he whose small desire  
Does not to greater things aspire!  
Not height, extent or large supplies,  
But fullness it is that satisfies.  
The brown chestnut is just as full  
As the shiphold stuffed with wool.  
The smallest circle is complete—  
Why should we race with fever heat?  
The fierce pursuit of happiness  
Brings disappointment and distress.  
By chasing, it cannot be caught.  
Where it belongs it came unsought.  
And fortune will more lightly flit  
To those who do not look for it.  
The smallest hut on earth may hold  
All human bliss, unsought, untold.

The thought of this dispels my sadness  
And warms my heart with sunny gladness.

#### IV

Tomorrow will be 'lection day  
And all may vote, the bosses say.  
Two candidates one office seek,  
Both chosen by the selfsame clique.  
They praise this great democracy  
Where all are equal, all are free.  
And others spout in vocal storm  
Big mouthfuls of the sought reform.  
Their party this our country saves,  
So that the starry flag still waves.

As for myself I only tell:  
I like to see us governed well.  
The prudent, wise and just should rule  
Not the base exploiter's tool.  
Parties rise and parties fall.  
The evil one controls them all.  
They are but puppets in his hands.  
He pipes to each its different dance,  
And often dons another mask  
Remaining at the selfsame task.  
Our party spirit we should smother,  
For its sets one against another.

A man of learning spoke to me  
These words which well with me agree:  
"Of greater things and higher aims  
The herd of men but grasp the names.  
To them the inner soul means less

Than trappings, color, form and dress.

“And while the sheep-like multitude  
Is ever in believing mood  
Will charlatans and fakirs thrive,  
The medicine man and priest survive,  
Will many eyes that see things double  
Follow the rainbow-colored bubble,  
Will signs on walls and bill-boards high  
Tell dunces where and what to buy.  
What wonder then that men will stare  
On faces rouged or powder-fair;  
That women flaunt in vain conceit  
Their gorgeous plumes upon the street;  
That I discovered to my grief,  
My knowledge mostly was belief.”

Yet many men are true and pure,  
And women virtuous and demure;  
And oftentimes I feel so glad  
That there is none who must be bad.

Were all the world intent on ill,  
I know, I could be upright still;  
And would deceive me all who can,  
I still could be an honest man;  
And all on earth, if they but would,  
I know full well they could be good,  
And all be happy, sound and whole  
Through wisdom, love and self-control.  
This earth might be a paradise  
Of plenty, though were harsh the skies.



# V

With weary feet and nigh forlorn  
 I went to church one Sunday morn,  
 And almost felt a starting tear,  
 So holy seemed its atmosphere;  
 But when I saw the grocer Theft,  
 Who cheats on week days right and left,  
 Singing on the lofty choir,  
 With fervor like celestial fire;  
 The real-estate man wrapt in prayer  
 Who stole a widow's meager share;  
 The lawyer who with vicious paw  
 Manipulates the court and law,  
 I thought 'twas all that I could bear  
 And left, to breathe in God's pure air.  
 With conscience and the Golden Rule  
 I need no law nor Sunday school.

Give me the parson gent of old  
 Who preached of hell and brimstone bold,  
 Of earth a vale of wrong and sin,  
 Of heaven where few could enter in.  
 The sinners turned through his beseeching,  
 For he himself believed his preaching.  
 But with the parson of the present  
 Truth is less than being pleasant.  
 He makes the darker deeds look white,  
 The lesser sins a sorry sight.  
 His sermon would the hour beguile  
 And God with Satan reconcile.

Yet several Christians I have met,  
 And good example each had set.



Among them was a heathen Jap  
Who clothed me with his coat and cap.  
Another was a hungry lad  
Who shared with me the last he had.  
And other poor have succored me  
While proudly passed the Pharisee.

Of faiths and creeds, I often thought,  
Men will believe what they were taught.  
Had all these pious Christian folk  
Been reared to bear some sultan's yoke,  
They would with equal faith today  
On bended knees to Allah pray.  
And Washington as rebel leader  
Denounced by every school-boy's Reader  
Would be today in ill repute  
Had Briton won in her pursuit.

I read the scriptures through and through  
But never thought they all were true;  
I do not search for every flaw,  
Nor care who was Cain's mother-in-law,  
Nor swallow every Bible tale,  
Like Jonah and the gulping whale;  
And no hereafter do I fear,  
For sin is amply punished here.

And yet I should not come to grief  
For all my heathen unbelief,  
For I don't think that God expected  
Beliefs of me which are rejected  
By the reason that He gave me;  
Or else, not He nor man could save me.

When hopes of earthly wealth seem vain,  
The greedy pray for heavenly gain.

If God is just as all are saying,  
He'll do what's right without our praying.  
Nor do I like to ask for favors;  
It all too much of begging savors.  
If praying helped I'd pray to be  
A help to all the weak and wee,  
So modest, meek and so content  
That ne'er my mind on heaven were bent.

Yet sometimes while I breathe a sigh,  
I think if I were God on high,  
I'd make a better world than this,  
All void of ill and full of bliss,  
With plenty for each man's desire—  
A world which angels might admire.  
I'd have a different Bible writ,  
Which would the present age besit,  
With flashy stories bright and brief,  
Compelling modern man's belief.

What mortal man can understand  
Why God made bog and desert land,  
The vermin and the pests on wings,  
The snakes and sundry biting things,  
The fleas that leap, the worms that crawl  
And angels weak enough to fall?  
Nor can I see why lucky Noah  
Preserved the centipede and boa.

Does God reveal the mystery  
Of nature and its history?  
Perhaps 'tis not for us to know.  
All things are so that should be so.  
Yet man will ever strain his eye  
For things too far or fine to spy.

Curiosity inordinate!  
This appetite is hard to sate,  
Is rated by the super-wise  
As harmful as some baser vice.  
Deeper down and deeper prying,  
Farther on and farther spying!  
The thread is up and still we weave!  
Where knowledge ceases we believe.

Our superstitions once were mystic,  
Now we take them scientific.  
Dire ills once known by homely terms  
Appear in microscopic germs.

I cannot see with tearful eye  
A beautiful, a smiling sky.  
The river's bend, the mountain's shoulder  
Look not alike to each beholder;  
And so 'tis true that God on high  
Seems not the same to every eye.  
Though upward looking on his knees  
Each man but his own image sees;  
And there are mystic minds that need  
A mystical religious creed.

## VI

When free and in poetic mood  
I love to seek the solitude.  
'Tis oft in quiet observation  
That poets find their inspiration.  
In nature's realm a life I find  
More fair and true than humankind.  
Her scenes and voices teach me more

Than sermons deep or bookish lore.  
The butterfly on motley wing,  
The woodland birds that blithely sing,  
The busy bee at early start  
Delight me more than human art.  
I watch the ant whose world is bound  
By some dead leaves that lie around.  
To it, its realm is full as great  
As to the king his far-bound state.  
I wonder how the bug may feel  
Whom happily just missed my heel,  
And what the eagle circling round  
May think of us upon the ground.  
Whate'er man has, I well can see,  
Some brute has too, in some degree.

At night I scan the planets far  
Who see this earth a twinkling star.  
Why, though our feet are fastened here,  
Should we not look beyond our sphere?  
We may not know the worlds up yonder,  
But we may worship, we may wonder!  
There is order in the sky.  
Why should be things on earth awry?

At other times my wife and child  
Attend me to the woodland wild.  
We walk beneath the darksome pines  
Where trustingly the ivy twines.  
Then often while the zephyr sighs  
I look into Belinda's eyes  
Where still her better self is shining,  
As through a cloud "the silver lining."  
When mid the blossoms of the glen

She seems to be herself again,  
And listening to the babbling brook  
She casts on me the selfsame look  
That spoke a language so enchanting  
As ever lovers' lips were panting,  
My soul expands to greater scope  
With a remembrance and a hope.  
And then it seems too sweet to tell,  
As once when chimed the wedding bell;  
Her eye so radiant, yet so meek,  
The flush of morning on her cheek.  
How modest seemed she and demure,  
Betokening a heart as pure  
As once when to a flowery land  
She came from God's creating hand.

And then I see in Elsie fair  
A bond between the parent pair  
While turn her hazel eyes on me  
And smile with childish witchery.  
I wonder oft what she may think  
While standing on the brooklet's brink  
She sees her image in the deep  
Where speckled troutlets upward leap,  
Or what behold her dreamy eyes  
When resting on the vacant skies.  
Perhaps a distant wonderland  
Where children play on wooded strand,  
Or fairies draped in golden gauze  
Dance velvet-shod on silken moss.  
And such a sprightly little elf,  
So full of fun is she herself!  
And with a joy I do believe

Her mother far more blest than Eve  
When, childless, she in Eden's bower  
Might envy her of such a flower.

While Elsie's thoughts in dreamland seem  
I also see a lovely dream:  
A cottage in a fertile dell,  
An oaken bucket o'er a well,  
Potatoes on the hillside growing  
And flowers in their season blowing;  
The orchard's boughs with fruitage bent,  
Exhaling their delicious scent;  
A trusty dog to watch and warn,  
And cackling hens around the barn.

Belinda dressed in home-made gown,  
Far from the fashion-crazy town,  
Its crowded haunts with sickening breath  
Where Virtue limps to early death,  
And dancing Vice unblushing smiles,  
With crimsoned lips the young beguiles.  
How selfish are its trading men!  
How colorless their street-bound ken!

All densely growing forms of life  
Are stunted by intenser strife.  
God has not intended man  
To grow as crowded as he can.  
Most neighborly the neighbors are  
Who live beyond the fields afar.

In nature free from artifice  
We shall no natural pleasure miss.  
And oh, what freedom will be ours  
Upon the meads, among the flowers!  
We'll grow the things which now we buy



At prices fixed by those up high.  
And we shall do an earnest part  
To find each lost domestic art.  
From flax and wool upon our land  
We'll make our clothes with busy hand.  
With cupboards filled with home-made things  
We'll live as free and rich as kings.  
The middle man and money-monger  
Will gather toll from us no longer.  
The tawdry raiment sweatshop-made  
Shall not our simple home invade.  
Thus shall we gladly till the soil  
To reap full fruitage of our toil.

And in the air of field and wood  
Will Elsie grow to womanhood,  
Will learn the household work and rules,  
Not pranks and fads of city schools.  
For most cannot afford to learn  
What will not help their living earn.  
What is to me the glove or mitt  
That will not my finger fit!  
The simple home-taught a, b, c  
To all learning gives the key.

I seem to see her eyes a-gleam  
With a maiden's blissful dream.  
Beside a shy, but ardent youth,  
Who speaks to her with simple truth,  
While turtle-doves are softly cooing  
At their chaste and timid wooing.

When things go wrong and all seems sad  
Such a dream will make me glad;  
And though it never should come true,



The lovely dream I shall not rue.  
The fragrant bloom itself is sweet,  
Though we may not its fruitage eat,  
And if illusion drugged my brain,  
That time I have not lived in vain.

Alas, when cold the day is breaking  
The dream has oft a rude awaking,  
When I cook breakfast and do chores  
While Belinda softly snores.

## VII

Some said: "Learn wisdom from the ant";  
But I must answer that I can't.  
I see her heavy burdens bear.  
She lives a life of toil and care  
To gather food and rear her brood.

For me the cricket while it sings,  
Making music with its wings,  
So free from care without ado  
For its desires and needs are few.  
A symbol of the simple life,  
With freedom, but no toil and strife.  
Not like us who daily borrow  
The cares belonging to the morrow.

And when it sings the evening long  
I feel that nature speaks in song.  
In every tune of piping Pan,  
Of sighing wind and singing man  
Will all Eternity rehearse  
The music of the Universe.

And though my hours of toil be long,  
I feel that life has time for song,

And start some homely old-time lay  
To keep the crowding cares away.  
I doubt not, were my lot more light  
All earth would look to me more bright,  
For fortune turns the pessimist  
Into a smiling optimist.

If there is something I deride,  
It is the pity-spurning pride.  
"To be pitied means defeat,  
To be envied, oh, how sweet!"  
The spirit of the world it is  
That speaks and ever spoke like this.

With purest of all human feeling  
Supporting, helping, giving, healing,  
Pity high and heaven-born  
Seeks the lowly, the forlorn!  
Love embraces but her own,  
Pity goes to all that groan.  
She sees the beggar on his round,  
The writhing worm upon the ground;  
And walks in gloom with silent tread  
To find the ill in bunk and bed.

When I lie low and all distressed  
'Tis only she who is my guest.  
I deem her, though she wanders here,  
The daughter of some higher sphere;  
For earthly life is on the plan  
That they oppress and take who can.

My eye and ear were oft deceiving  
And forced upon me wrong believing;  
My reason oft led me astray,

My idols were of common clay;  
But what my soul and body feel  
I know quite well, it must be real.  
My pains and joys though now forgot  
Who will contend that they were not?  
And likewise, too, the faith I feel

I know full well, for me 'tis true,  
Howe'er it may appear to you.  
I know just how the heathen feels  
When he before his idol kneels.  
I cannot see his ghost or wraith,  
But I bow before his faith.  
Whate'er he sees, it draws him higher  
Than sordid aim or low desire.  
I call it worse than mean deceiving  
To rob the faith of the believing.  
Our hopes are wandering to the tomb,  
The frost of morning blights the bloom,  
But hope for heaven beyond the bier  
Cannot be disappointed here.  
Man will not learn at heaven's portal  
That his soul was not immortal.

## VIII

I hear them boast with glowing eyes  
Of all our country's wealth that lies  
In banks and bonds, in coin and stocks,  
Or safes secured by patent locks,  
In forest, mine and fertile field,  
Which every year their billions yield.

I'll tell you what is true of this:  
Like one great field our country is,

That grows potatoes, bread and meat,  
But scarce enough that all may eat.  
Rake some in heaps and call them wealth.  
Besides our daily bread and health  
There is no such a thing as wealth.  
Had each of us his fill to eat  
They'd cease exporting pork and wheat.  
On fertile field the Hindu starves,  
His harvest heaped on English wharves.

My age is nearly thirty-one,  
And more than half my life is gone,  
Though should I live three score and ten,  
The limit set for mortal men.

No matter what the solar time,  
We know when man is in his prime.  
Life is not timed by circling spheres.  
Its latter half contains more years  
Than does the first with quicker pace;  
For in a life's uneven race,  
When walking slow more hours have passed,  
But not more steps when comes the last.  
The moth that lived its one-day span  
Has lived as long as full-aged man.

## IX

In solitude, my mind at ease,  
I oft make verses such as these:  
The fruit that made old Adam fall  
Has been distilled to alcohol,  
Which now, his children's tempting foe,  
Brings wreck and ruin, and crime and woe.

As to tobacco I'm not sure;  
It seems a solace to the poor.  
I saw a man his clay-pipe fill,  
And knew he was not brooding ill.  
So like the man who sings a song:  
I know he is not bent on wrong.

Ere you increase your helpless brood  
Be sure they shall have clothes and food.  
If you say oft at early morn:  
"Would that I never had been born,"  
Make sure that you bear not the blame  
That others, later, say the same.

The doctor to the lawyer said:  
"Too many spineless fools are bred."  
The answer was: "Keep them alive;  
They are that you and I may thrive."

Before you praise your country high,  
And flaunt its flag against the sky,  
See that the rogue with portly gait  
Rules not your county, town or state.

The truly great, unknown to fame,  
Cares not to see his printed name.

All perfect is the bird's nest called.  
No doubt, it finds with it no fault.  
Imperfectness—but sentiment!  
'Tis naught but human discontent.

Be glad of good, to ill resigned—  
Happiness is a state of mind.

## X

So many an elder man I meet  
Who wanders on with weary feet,  
And tells, forgetful of his woe,  
That he reared children long ago.

A sorry sight, by hardship sere!  
Forsaken by the brood he reared!

Ungrateful world! but I doubt not  
That this shall be my future lot.  
An outcast in my native land,  
And begging alms from Pity's hand!  
And dying slowly day by day  
Like the branch with one green spray.

Grim Death! but we no longer fear him  
When the years have brought us near him;  
When he with chilling clasp of hands  
So neighbor-like before us stands.  
Then wipe your tears, and be at ease,  
When Death comes only to release!

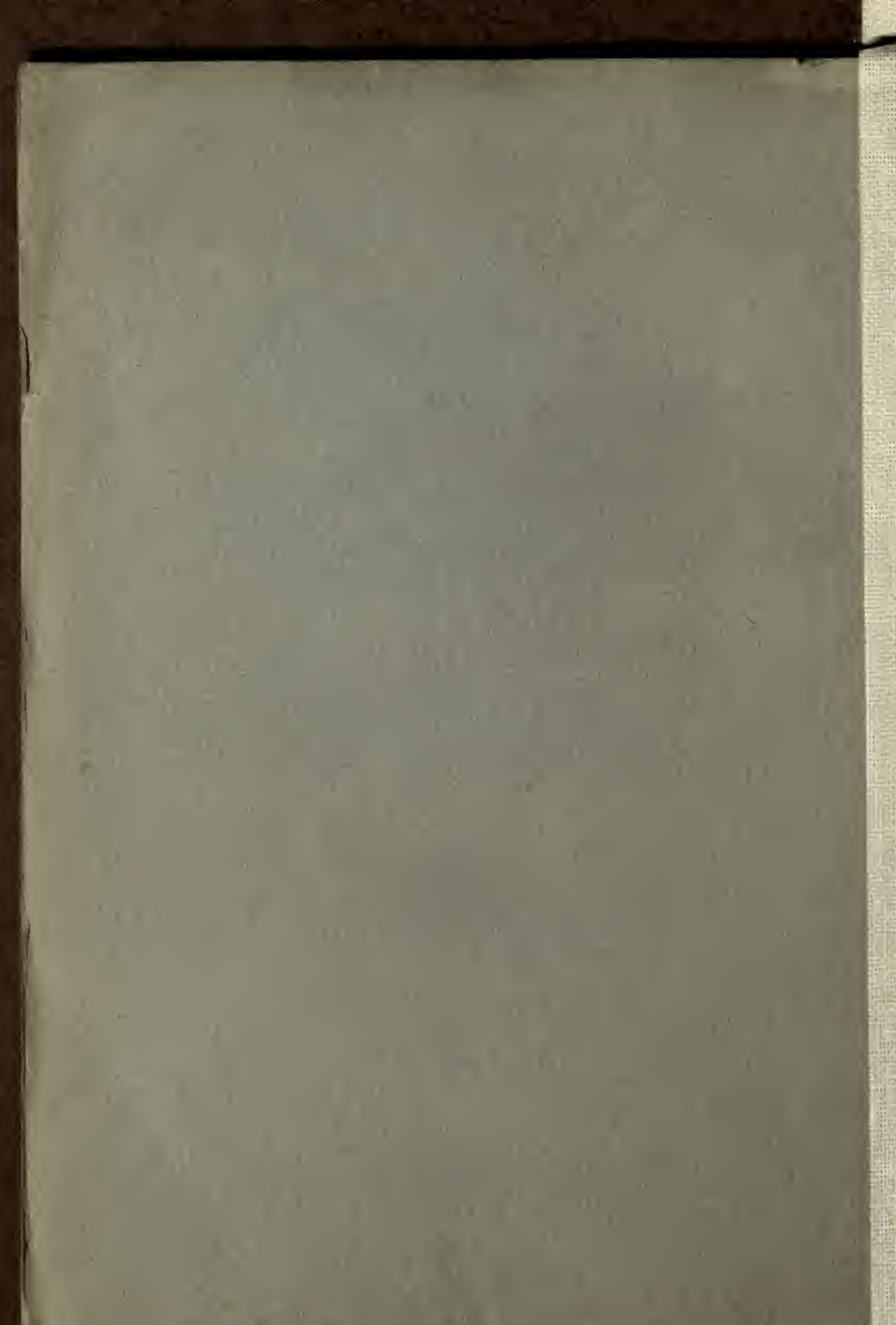
But lay I now upon the bier  
Belinda scarce would drop a tear,  
Yet put on mourning to perfection,  
For dark looks well with her complexion;  
And have a husband soon again,  
For women can make fools of men.

There be no gravestone nor a wreath  
Where my body lies beneath.  
'Tis well enough for me to know  
That the grass will richer grow,  
Just because I lie below.

THE END







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